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5 May 53

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(NSC) BRIEFING: LAOS 6 May 1953

1. Latest reports on the military situation in Laos'

give a somewhat less pessimistic picture than
that of a week ago.

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- a. The invasion of Laos involved three Viet Minh divisions and elements of a fourth.
- b. Now two of these divisions are withdrawing to Tonkin.
- c. In Luang Prabang the French have 4,000 men in five battalions.
- d. Only five Viet Minh battalions are known to be nearby.
- e. At the Plaine des Jarres, the French have seven well-entrenched battalions (about 5,600).
- f. Viet Minh strength there is believed to be one division (about 10,000), but they could over-run the French only at great cost.

g. [] some Viet Minh elements

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are moving south toward Paksane or Vientiane

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- h. Paksane is defended by three battalions,
Vientiane by two, in both cases mostly Laotian.

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2. The bulk of the Viet Minh forces remained in

Tonkin and are a serious threat to French defenses in the Delta.

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- a. They could also attack the French garrison at Na San which is still dependent on supply by air.
- b. Guerrilla fighting inside the Delta continues at a high rate.

3. The whole fighting area, however, will be drenched by rain in about ten days.

- a. This will continue all summer and severely hamper military operations.
- b. Probably the Viet Minh never planned to go as far as we feared and is now stopping to prepare for next fall's campaign.

4. The Viet Minh, without advancing farther, has now won an important strategic military victory.

- a. The enemy is now established on several important Mekong tributaries.

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- b. It already controlled the Red River drainage system in Tonkin.
- c. Now large supplies can be built up in either or both areas for future drives against the dispersed French forces.

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5. Great political gains have also accrued from the Communist successes in Laos.
- a. Viet Minh followers have been given a big morale uplift.
 - b. French-Laotian relations have been strained by French failure to appeal the aggression to the UN.
 - c. Laotian confidence in the French has been shaken by the French inability to defend their country.
 - d. Probably taking advantage of the Laotian situation, the King of Cambodia recently threatened revolt unless the French gave his country virtual independence.
 - e. He thus suddenly became a national hero with the support of all Cambodian leaders.

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- f. The French are offering some concessions which will be grudgingly accepted but will not eliminate the basic frictions here.
- g. In Vietnam, Viet Minh prestige is much greater and Vietnamese nationalists are comparing Bao Dai's inertia unfavorably with the strong stand taken by the Cambodian King.

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6. The French have failed to take advantage of the opportunity offered to disprove Viet Minh propaganda that it is fighting a civil war against French imperialism.
- a. Last week the French appointed die-hard colonial administrators as High Commissioners to the three Indochinese states.
 - b. This was a step backwards in the struggle to get the nationalistic Vietnamese to support the war effort.

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7. The Thais are greatly concerned over a possible uprising of the 50,000 Vietnamese in north Thailand to join the invaders of Laos.
 - a. Thai leaders are disturbed that the West may not fully understand the threat to their country.
 - b. Phibun is also worried that the attack on Laos is somehow connected with the newly established Thai Autonomous Government in south Yunnan.

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8. The Chinese Communists, who may be master-minding all these developments, have remained well in the background.

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- b. Until the middle of last week they took no public note of the invasion of Laos.
- c. Now they describe it, as Viet Minh propaganda does, as the work of a Laotian People's Liberation Army.

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9. They have recently made sharp propaganda attacks on Thailand which they accuse of sending troops into Laos to help the French.
- a. Undoubtedly this line is intended to discourage the Thais from doing anything to aid the French.
 - b. Certainly the Chinese Communists would like to see the government of Thailand overthrown.
 - c. However, they don't seem to be planning any immediate action to this end.
 - d. The Communists in the Far East like to work through native "Liberation" armies.
 - e. As yet there is no "liberation" movement in Thailand for them to support.

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